Disaggregating diasporas as actors

By Carolin Fischer

Much research on diasporas emphasises the ties between those inside and outside the country of origin, usually in connection with transnational flows of money, ideas, and goods. Diasporas are often represented as actors whose engagements have significant effects back home. The promotion of diasporas as a panacea to shortcomings in development or as players in home country politics triggered sceptical reactions of scholars. Many call the conceptual basis of such representations into question (Sinatti and Horst 2014).

In his contribution to this collection, Nicholas Van Hear makes a convincing case for a more nuanced approach to the involvement of diasporas in origin countries. He shows that transnational activities are not necessarily directed towards the home country as such. Rather they target different types of collectives or – in Van Hear's terminology – 'spheres of engagement', which entail different combinations of the private and the public. However, it is rarely asked why (groups of) people living in the diaspora direct their engagement towards certain spheres in the origin country and how they are socially organised as actors.

Drawing on qualitative data from research among Afghan diaspora populations in the UK and Germany I suggest that we should not only disaggregate the spheres towards which transnational engagements are directed but also disentangle the social settings in which people take action. I discovered that social identities and the inter-personal ties, which connect people at a specific destination country and across borders, constitute a particularly important dimension of these 'action settings'. Adopting a more actor-centred perspective that unpacks

the 'inner workings' of diaspora helps understand how members of diasporas come to engage with their origin countries.

The fact that diaspora populations are not homogeneous entities that engage in joint action towards shared goals is widely acknowledged. It is equally recognised that social identities within diasporas are often contested (Anthias 1998). Not everyone identifies with the local and globally dispersed population of co-nationals to the same extent and along the same lines. During fieldwork among Afghan diaspora populations in Germany and the UK I found that people rarely encounter each other simply as 'Afghans'. Instead perceptions are filtered through a range of identity categories among which family and socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicity and political affiliations are prominent.

Families form an important dimension of people's social environment in the receiving society as Razma[32] (26), a young professional from Greater London, illustrates:

We kind of keep mostly in the family. So I interact mostly with mum, dad, my cousins. I've got family abroad: New York, Canada… We have a close-knit family relationship but we never really get involved with anything outside of that.

Families also indicate people's socio-economic backgrounds and thus reflect the social stratification of the Afghan society (Bourdieu 1984). Shabnam (25), a university student living in mid-west Germany, illustrates how family backgrounds shape the way people approach each other and navigate within social environments:

'I can tell you what happens if Afghans get to know other Afghans', Shabnam claims. 'They will say "oh, you are Afghan too… where do your parents come from, which city?" That's how Afghans localise each other. It is like you would ask someone in Afghanistan "where do your parents come from?" It's the same in Germany. You want to have an idea of people's family.'

Families in this sense are constitutive for self-identification and external categorisation. Likewise ethnic backgrounds not only inform

mutual perceptions and categorisation but also determine patterns of social organisation and principles of inclusion and exclusion (Jenkins 1994). Abdul-Samad (in his 60s) is representative of those who feel that Afghan diaspora organisations are not necessarily open and approachable for everyone:

There are some organisations who have established a community centre, whatever, for certain groups of Afghans. For instance there is one for Pashtuns, one for Hazaras, probably one for Tajiks…

As a result he frequently encounters people claiming 'oh no, I can't go to that one because I am not of that [particular group]' or 'I have been to that one [organisation] and I was not welcomed'. Whether such perceptions are based on real antagonisms or merely perceptions is difficult to discern. Either way, what matters most is the divisive effect of real and perceived ethnic biases. Over time and through frequent reiteration, preconceptions can lead to the formation of social boundaries that delineate self-contained groups.

The boundaries delineating groups of characteristics based on family ties, ethnic origin, political affiliation or socio-economic background, are subject to temporal and local variability. Ethnicity, for example, only gained significance as a category of difference among Afghans in the diaspora after the onset of the 'ethnicisation of politics' (Schetter 2005) in wartime Afghanistan. Ethnicity as a subject of warfare and political rhetoric was extended to the diaspora, prompting instances of ethnic divisions and segregation of wider communities. Such contingencies reify continuous formation and re-formation of diasporas. It is important to note that individuals represent various identity categories and partake in various social collectives. They are part of distinct family structures, members of ethnic groups and representatives of political views. Yet they are also part of a wider imagined Afghan community (see Figure 1). Ferdaws (in his mid-30s), a PhD student living in Greater London, makes this explicit:

I am part of the Afghans, so I cannot be disconnected, no matter where I live, no matter what I think. I am an Afghan and I am proud of that, so I want to be part of them, no matter where or no matter what.

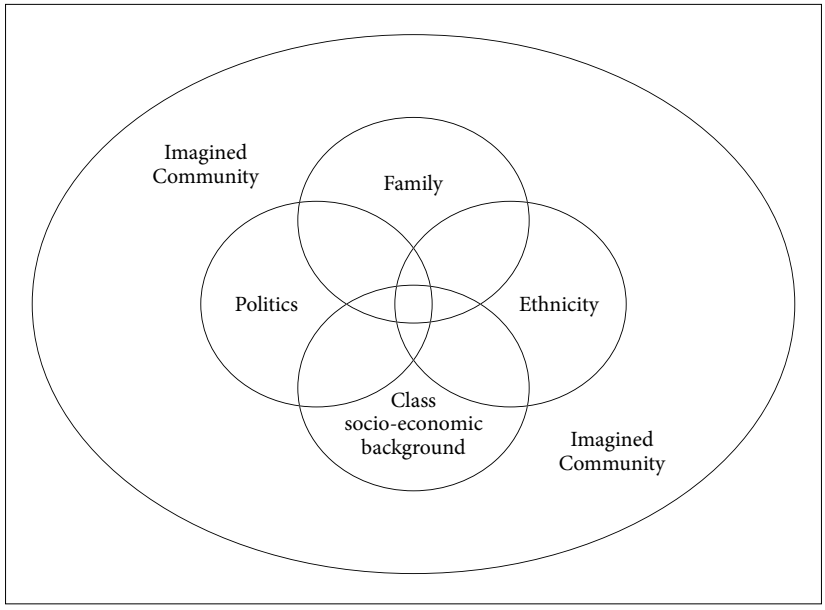

Figure 1. Social organisation among Afghan diaspora populations

Ferdaws' self-perceptions mark a stark contrast to the more narrowly defined ideas of belonging outlined above.

The fractures of diaspora populations also shape the social settings in which people engage in transnational activities directed towards the country of origin. Engagements undertaken in a family context tend to be geared towards the support of family members in Afghanistan. By contrast, engagements undertaken by wider coalitions of actors in the diaspora tend to reach out to a target group that is defined in broader terms, such as 'known community'. Hence respondents' transnational engagements do not only derive from the ties they maintain with Afghanistan and their ideas and desires for change. They are also a response to the specificities of their social environments in the diaspora.

Notwithstanding fractured patterns of social organisation, the research discovered a general tendency among respondents to act in the name of an imagined community or an imaginary Afghanistan. This imagined community reflects crosscutting home country attachments and a widely shared sense of 'being Afghan'. Moreover, similar ideas of change and development and taking action with the aim of reaching similar ends are expressed. However, social settings

of action rest on more narrowly defined social ties, which largely derive from the identity categories discussed. People may take action in the name of an imagined Afghan community, but the imagined community does not provide a basis for social mobilisation. Afghans in the diaspora do engage with Afghanistan but they do not act as a cohesive diaspora.

The specification of the nature and setup of diasporas as actors has important implications for the agency exercised in the context of transnational engagements (Kleist 2008; Mohan 2002). We do not learn much about the agency of diasporans if we focus on the outcomes of engagement (Raghuram 2009; Sinatti and Horst 2014). When trying to explain agency it is necessary to capture the 'inner workings' of Afghan diaspora populations. My examination of Afghan transnational engagements suggests that agency is an interactive response of actors to their specific relationships with the origin country and groups of co-nationals in the receiving country and beyond. □